



U.S. President Barack Obama speaks on the phone to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on June 8, 2009.
Credit: Pete Souza/White House.



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Obama's revisionist 'Promised Land'

In his new memoir, the former U.S. president misleads readers in a way that will forever shape their negative perspective of the Jewish state.

(November 26, 2020 / JNS) I have never criticized former U.S. President Barack Obama publicly—neither during my time in the Knesset nor anywhere else—despite my having disagreed with many of his policies. I am of the strong opinion that Israelis should not engage in or interfere with American politics, and I regularly offer a blanket thank you to all American presidents, including Obama, for their economic and military support for Israel.

However, his memoir, *A Promised Land*, is filled with historical inaccuracies that I feel the need to address. His telling of Israel's story (at the beginning of Chapter 25) not only exhibits a flawed understanding of the region—which clearly impacted his policies as president—but misleads readers in a way that will forever shape their negative perspective of the Jewish state.

Obama relates, for example, how the British were “occupying Palestine”



when they issued the Balfour Declaration calling for a Jewish state. But labeling Great Britain as an “occupier” clearly casts doubt on its legitimacy to determine anything about the future of the Holy Land, and that wasn’t the situation.

While it is true that England had no legal rights in Palestine when the Balfour Declaration was issued in 1917, that changed just five years later. The League of Nations, the precursor to the United Nations, gave the British legal rights over Palestine in its 1922 “Mandate for Palestine,” which specifically mentions “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

The League also said that “recognition has thereby been given to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and to the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country.”

The former president’s noted omission of the internationally agreed-upon mandate for the British to establish a home for the Jews in Palestine misinforms the reader, who will conclude that the movement for a Jewish state in Palestine had no legitimacy or international consent.

“Over the next 20 years, Zionist leaders mobilized a surge of Jewish migration to Palestine,” Obama writes, creating the image that once the British illegally began the process of forming a Jewish state in Palestine, Jews suddenly started flocking there.

The truth is that Jews, who maintained a continual presence throughout the 2,000 years that most were exiled from the land, had already been moving to Palestine in large numbers way before then; considerably more than 100,000 immigrants arrived in the late 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. Then, in the 1920s, high numbers fleeing anti-Semitism in Europe could only find safe haven in Palestine due to the United States having instituted quotas in 1924 on the number of Jews who could enter America.

The number of immigrants rose even more in the 1930s when Adolf Hitler rose to power and began his conquest of Europe while the world remained silent.

Historical context is important, and once Obama chose to write about the history, he should have provided the full context and portrayed the Jews as they were: a persecuted and desperate people searching for safety, and not, as he implies, strong conquerors flooding into Palestine.

His claim that the new immigrants “organized highly trained armed forces to defend their settlements” is also misleading. A more accurate way to describe it would have been: “Because the Arabs in the region mercilessly attacked the Jewish areas, the Jewish refugees had no choice but to take up arms to defend themselves.”



Acknowledging that the Arabs were attacking Jews before there was even a State of Israel is important historical context for understanding the Israeli-Arab conflict.

A Promised Land recounts, as well, how the United Nations passed a partition plan for Palestine in November 1947, by dividing the country into a Jewish and Arab state, which the “Zionist leaders,” as he calls them, accepted, but to which the “Arab Palestinians, as well as surrounding Arab nations that were just emerging from colonial rule, strenuously objected.”

Obama’s use of “Zionist leaders” instead of “Jewish leaders” plays right into the current international climate, in which it is politically correct to be “anti-Zionist,” while unacceptable to be anti-Jewish. (In reality, Zionism is the movement for Jews to live in their biblical and historic homeland, so being against that actually is anti-Semitism, but that’s for another discussion.)

The description of “Arab nations that were just emerging from colonial rule” is a clear attempt to justify the Arab refusal of the U.N. Partition Plan. Those poor “Arab nations” that have been suffering due to outsiders colonizing their “nations” simply could not accept another “colonial” entity, the Jews, entering the region.

But the truth is that with the exception of Egypt, which was not colonized, none of the neighboring countries that rejected the partition plan had been established states before World War I. Yes, the post-war mandates of the League of Nations gave control in the region to the British and the French for a few decades, but this was in place of the Ottoman Empire that had controlled the region for centuries. Thus, the image of countries emerging from long-standing colonial rule as a subtle attempt to justify their objection to the Partition Plan is simply false.

Obama tells the story of the establishment of the State of Israel in two sentences, which are nothing short of outright revisionist history: “As Britain withdrew, the two sides quickly fell into war. And with Jewish militias claiming victory in 1948, the state of Israel was officially born.”

Wow. I don’t even know where to begin. The two sides didn’t “fall into war” when Britain withdrew; the two sides had been fighting for decades, with the Arabs—who rejected more than half-a-century of efforts to establish a Jewish state in the region—attacking the Jews, and the Jews defending themselves. When the British then left the area in May 1948, the Jews made a very difficult decision to declare their independence based on the U.N. Partition Plan, which gave the right for a Jewish state alongside an Arab state.

There were no “Jewish militias claiming victory.” There was a unified Jewish army that formed the Israel Defense Forces, which knew that the surrounding Arab countries would begin an all-out assault to destroy Israel the moment its Jewish leadership declared an independent fledgling Jewish state. And that is exactly what the Arab armies did. The new State of Israel fought off that assault for months, emerging in 1949 both weakened and fragile.

Obama’s perspective on the formation of the State of Israel no doubt affected his foreign policy regarding the Jewish state. If one sees Israel as a colonial force occupying the land as a result of its armed militias, then it will be treated as an outsider that wronged others to establish itself as a state. The former president misleads others into believing this, as well.

The most disingenuous sentence of Obama's history of Israel is in his description of what happened during the 30 years following Israel's establishment: "For the next three decades, Israel would engage in a succession of conflicts with its Arab neighbors"

What? I had to read that sentence many times because I could not believe that a president of the United States could write such misleading, deceptive and damaging words about his country's close ally.

Israel did not "engage" in any conflict with the surrounding Arab countries. The Arab armies and their terrorists attacked Israel again and again, and Israelis fought to defend themselves.

A straightforward history of Middle East wars involving Israel yields this basic truth. Facts are facts, and the former president's misrepresentation of Israel as a country that sought conflict instead of peace—one that willingly engaged in wars with the Arabs—does an injustice to peace-seeking Israel and riles up anti-Israel sentiment.

Obama's description of the 1967 Six-Day War continues this revisionism: "A greatly outnumbered Israeli military routed the combined armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. In the process, Israel seized control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria."

Here he fails to address what led up to the war, when all those Arab armies gathered along Israel's borders and declared their intention to wipe it off the map. He doesn't describe Israel's pleading with Jordan not to enter the war, nor that Jordan altogether had no legal rights to the West Bank, which it occupied in 1948 and annexed against international law in 1950.

Most significantly, Obama fails to mention Israel's willingness, immediately after the war, to withdraw from all the areas that it won in its defensive battle in exchange for peace; and by extension, he also fails to tell of the Arab League's "Three No's" in response to that offer: no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel and no negotiations with Israel.

This omission serves once again to portray Israel as the aggressive occupier that seeks conflict and not peace.

The former president continues with another outright falsehood, which helps give insight into his policies regarding Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

The "rise of the PLO (the Palestinian Liberation Organization)" was a "result" of the Six-Day War he writes. That makes it seem like the Palestinian liberation movement, including its violent and murderous attacks against Israelis, was only a result of Israel's taking control over the West Bank, eastern Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.

It strengthens the message that if only Israel would vacate these areas, there would be peace between Israel and the Palestinians. This is what spurs leaders around the world to suggest that Israeli settlements in these areas are the obstacle to peace in the region.

But there is one flaw with this story and logic. It's not true. The PLO was established in 1964—three years before Israel was in control of any of those "occupied" areas and three years before there were any settlements.

What exactly was this Palestinian organization liberating at that time? Is there any conclusion other than the liberation of the Jewish state in its entirety? What other option could there be?

This is why the “Free Palestine” movement chants, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” They are against the existence of Israel anywhere between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. They see such a state as a colonial enterprise with armed militias grabbing the land of others, just as Obama leads readers to believe when describing the formation of the state.

The false description of the PLO rising after 1967 serves the narrative that the “occupation” and the settlements are the cause of the conflict, and this, no doubt, had a direct impact on Obama’s “not one brick” policy, including freezing settlement construction, in an effort to bring about peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Obama describes the failed Camp David accords of 2000, in which former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered the Palestinians more than 90 percent of what they were asking for. “Arafat demanded more concessions, however, and talks collapsed in recrimination,” he writes. But the talks didn’t simply “collapse.” Sixty-six days later, Arafat unleashed the Second Intifada, in which 1,137 Israeli civilians were murdered and 8,341 were maimed by Yasser Arafat-funded terrorists who blew themselves up in Israeli buses and cafes.

Don’t trust my word on this. Mamduh Nofal, former military commander of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, revealed that following Camp David, “Arafat told us, ‘Now we are going to fight so we must be ready.’”

In addition, Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Zahar said in September 2010 that in the summer of 2000, as soon as Arafat understood that *all* of his demands would not be met, he instructed Hamas, Fatah and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades to begin attacking Israel. And Mosab Hassan Yousef, son of Hamas founder Sheikh Hassan Yousef, has verified that the Second Intifada was pre-planned by Arafat.

Not only does Obama fail to accurately connect the Second Intifada to Arafat’s not receiving everything the Palestinians asked for at Camp David—demands that would have prevented Israel from being able to defend itself against Palestinian terrorism—but he seems to place the blame for the intifada on Israel.

He describes the September 2000 visit of Israel’s opposition leader and subsequent prime minister, Ariel Sharon, to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem as “provocative” and a “stunt” that “enraged Arabs near and far.”

But Obama neglects to mention that Sharon only visited there after Israel’s Interior Ministry received assurances from the security chief of the Palestinian Authority that no uproar would arise as a result of the visit.

In fact, Jibril Rajoub, head of Preventive Security in the West Bank, confirmed that Sharon could visit the sensitive area as long as he did not enter a mosque or pray publicly, rules to which Sharon adhered.

Even more incredibly, Obama describes the Temple Mount as “one of Islam’s holiest sites,” making no mention that it is *the* holiest site in Judaism.

An innocent reader who is unfamiliar with the region and its history reads this and concludes that it was simply wrong for a Jewish leader to walk onto a Muslim religious site. On the other hand, if he or she knew that it is the holiest site for Jews, then they would more likely wonder why there was anything wrong with Sharon's having gone there—except Obama omits that part, leading anyone to conclude that Sharon was in the wrong.

That omission, together with the exclusion of Arafat's plans for the intifada right after negotiations at Camp David failed, can only lead one to conclude that Israel was responsible for the five years of bloodshed during the Second Intifada.

Obama's history lesson continues with the tension between Israel and Gaza. Remarkably, he makes zero mention of the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in 2005, when Israel pulled out all of its troops from the strip while forcing 9,000 Jewish citizens to leave their homes.

Anyone reading the president's description of the wars between Israel and Hamas would never know that Israel no longer "occupies" Gaza, and that the Palestinians have been free to build a wondrous "Israeli-free" Palestinian state there for the last 15 years. That omission is glaring.

Finally, Obama's misleading words describing Israel's response to Hamas rocket fire on its civilian population only serves to inflame and incite anti-Israel sentiment worldwide. That response, he writes, included "Israeli Apache helicopters leveling entire neighborhoods" in Gaza—Apache helicopters that he identifies as coming from the United States, a subtle or not-too-subtle questioning of whether the United States should be providing Israel with military aid if it is used in this manner.

More importantly, what does he mean by "leveling entire neighborhoods," other than to imply that Israel indiscriminately bombs Gazan neighborhoods, willfully murdering innocent people? And what human being on Earth wouldn't be riled up to condemn Israel for such inhumane activity?

The problem is that it's false. Israel targets terrorist leaders and the rockets that they fire into Israeli cities. Tragically, Hamas leaders use innocent Palestinians as human shields by hiding behind them in civilian neighborhoods, and by launching rockets into Israel from there and from hospitals and mosques.

Israel does its best not to kill innocent people, even airdropping leaflets announcing an imminent airstrike, and calls off missions to destroy rocket launchers or kill terrorist leaders when there are too many civilians in the area. Israel most certainly does not launch retaliatory attacks that aimlessly "level" entire neighborhoods.

I have no problem with criticism of Israel. We can debate the issues in intellectually honest discussions, and in the end, we may have to agree to disagree about Israel's policies. But no one should accept a book that is filled with historical inaccuracies that invariably lead innocent and unknowing readers to reach false conclusions. Such a devastating book has real-life ramifications and consequences.

It is terribly disappointing. I surely would have expected truth, accuracy and fairness from Barack Obama, America's 44th president. But the falsehoods and inaccuracies in this memoir only feed the theory that Obama was, in fact, anti-Israel. Now, through *A Promised Land*, he seeks to convince others to join him.

Dov Lipman served as a member of the 19th Knesset.



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